

Realising children and young people's rights to positive relationships, and sexual health and wellbeing

Commissioner's Position

South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People calls for continued and focused effort on ensuring children and young people across the state have the knowledge and skills they need to experience positive, healthy and respectful relationships.

Ensuring South Australian children and young people have the knowledge and skills to experience positive, healthy, and respectful relationships is critical to the enjoyment of all rights set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to which Australia is a signatory.

To fully realise children and young people's rights, we need to ensure policy and legal frameworks, systems and services meet the specific needs of children and young people. We also need to ensure children and young people experience safe and inclusive environments. This includes looking at the way school environments enable and reinforce sexism and other forms of discrimination.

All children and young people should have access to comprehensive and inclusive information about relationships and sexuality regardless of their age, ability, socioeconomic background or engagement with mainstream schooling. A key way this can be implemented is through formal education where young people learn about positive relationships, sexual health and wellbeing. This education must start in early childhood and engage

children and young people consistently over time, rather than on a one-off basis.

This education should be grounded in human rights, including gender equality, and support children and young people to understand and communicate their feelings, make informed decisions, understand their own rights, protect the rights of others, reflect on power dynamics and challenge gender stereotypes. These skills lay the foundation for lifelong wellbeing and are critical to developing and maintaining healthy relationships with parents and carers, family members, and other adults, as well as with peers, friends and partners.

Both state and federal governments recognise the important role of education and school settings in efforts to address gender-based violence. While South Australia's state-based curriculum and the national Australian Curriculum support educators to deliver some core elements of relationships and sexual health education, it is difficult to assess what, when and how such curriculum is being delivered. Despite recent commitments to strengthen consent and respectful relationships education, current approaches are falling short of what national and international evidence tells us is needed.

This Policy Position builds on my extensive engagement with children and young people across South Australia on a range of issues, including experiences of school-based relationships and sexual health education, the impacts of sexism and gender stereotypes, children's rights and wellbeing at school more broadly, and their perspectives on friendships and belonging.

The following reports provide further information:

- [Sex Education in South Australia: What young people need to know for sexual health and safety](#)
- [Sexism and Stereotypes: The views and experiences of SA school students](#)
- [Seen but Not Heard: The experiences of South Australian young people in years 8, 9 and 10](#)
- [Friendship and Belonging: The perspectives of children and young people.](#)

Children and young people's rights to health and wellbeing

All children and young people have rights to the highest attainable standard of health and to access information and an education that enables them to lead fulfilling lives. Children and young people's reproductive and sexual health rights and their rights to experience healthy and respectful relationships are indivisible from all child rights, including the right to be heard and to be protected against all forms of discrimination.¹

A rights-based approach to health and education aims for more than the prevention of harm or the absence of disease; it recognises the positive rights of all children and young people to access information and services, and to understand and assert their rights and protect the rights of others. This is consistent with the World Health Organisation's definition of health as 'complete physical, mental and social wellbeing' rather than 'merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.²

Comprehensive relationships and sexual health education lays the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing by supporting young people to feel positive and confident in their own bodies, develop healthy and respectful social and sexual relationships, openly discuss complex issues and critically reflect on the world around them, trust others and know where to seek help when they need it.

The evidence

Building on the work of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), we understand comprehensive relationships and sexual health education as education that:

aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realise their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.³

The UNESCO International Guidance on Sexuality Education (hereafter, UNESCO guidance) outlines eight key topics to be covered in comprehensive sexuality education, which are 'equally important, mutually reinforcing and intended to be taught alongside one another'.⁴

These topics are:

1. Relationships
2. Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality
3. Understanding Gender
4. Violence and Staying Safe
5. Skills for Health and Well-being
6. The Human Body and Development
7. Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour
8. Sexual and Reproductive Health

National and international evidence highlights the effectiveness of comprehensive relationships and sexual health education in contributing to a range of health, safety and wellbeing outcomes. When delivered consistently, comprehensive relationships and sexual health education:

- Improves social and emotional learning and lays the foundation for positive and healthy relationships.⁵
- Promotes respect for diversity, human rights and gender equality, including by challenging gender stereotypes.⁶

- Contributes to the prevention of child sexual abuse and the prevention of dating and intimate partner violence and encourages help-seeking behaviours and access to support.⁷
- Prevents and reduces risk of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy.⁸
- Increases media literacy and encourages critical thinking about pornography, social and popular media.⁹
- Influences behaviours that lead to safer and more inclusive learning environments, including reducing homophobia and transphobia.¹⁰

This education is most effective when it is grounded in human rights, explicitly focuses on gender, and takes a positive, affirming and inclusive approach to relationships and sexuality that respects and celebrates diversity, including diversity in relation to sexuality, gender and culture.¹¹

Evidence also supports a whole-of-school approach to relationships and sexual health education which engages families and considers schools as education institutions, workplaces and community hubs. This goes 'beyond curriculum delivery alone to create more equal and respectful attitudes, behaviours, structures and practices across the school culture'.¹²

School-based prevention initiatives are most effective when messages are reinforced and validated outside of the classroom. This highlights the importance of whole-of-community efforts to embed a culture of respect and equity across all systems and settings where children and young people interact, including sports clubs, the media, workplaces, and online.

The current situation

Policy context

Relationships and sexual health are recognised to varying degrees in policies and plans across a range of portfolios at the state and national level, including health, education, early childhood, child protection, online safety, gender equality and family violence.

The framing of key issues and priorities, as well as the key terms used, vary depending on the context. In strategies related to child protection or online safety, the focus tends to be on protecting children from harm from adults with peer relationships receiving less attention. In health policy, the focus tends to be on access to services and specific aspects of sexual and reproductive health, including the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy. However, as discussed below, South Australia currently lacks an overarching strategy for children and young people's health, including children and young people's reproductive and sexual health.

In the context of efforts to address gender-based violence, state and federal governments have made investments to strengthen consent and respectful relationships education. The federal government invested \$77.6 million investment to improve Consent and Respectful Relationships Education in the October 2022 Federal Budget. Implementation of this measure is informed and guided by the National Respectful Relationships Education Expert Working Group, which is overseeing:

- a rapid review of the current delivery of respectful relationships programs to identify opportunities for improvement, and
- the development of a National Respectful Relationships Education Framework to support the delivery of high-quality respectful relationships education.

This measure provides grant funding to support respectful relationships education in all jurisdictions and across sectors.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has also been funded to conduct a national survey of 14 to 18-year-olds about their experiences of consent and sexuality education. In January 2024, the federal government released the Commonwealth Consent Policy Framework, which proposes a shared community definition of consent and supports organisations working with young people to promote healthy sexual relationships and consent.¹³

Australia's National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032 acknowledges that 'evidence-based and resourced Respectful Relationships Education can help create the generational change needed to free Australia from gender-based violence'.¹⁴ The delivery of South Australia's Keeping Safe: Child Protection Curriculum (KS:CPC) is one of the state government's commitments under the First Action Plan 2023–2027.¹⁵

Victoria has mandated the delivery of respectful relationships education as a core component of the Victorian Curriculum from Foundation to Year 12. The delivery of respectful relationships education remains a priority in reforms following Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence, including the Free from Violence Second Action Plan (2022–2025).

South Australia's policy framework for addressing domestic, family and sexual violence, the Committed to Safety framework, expired in June 2022 and a new strategy is currently being developed. Commitments under this framework have been limited to the delivery of the Keeping Safe: Child Protection Curriculum rather than broader comprehensive respectful relationships and/or sexuality education.¹⁶

Curriculum context

The Australian Curriculum guides educators to deliver some of the core elements of relationships and sexual health education through the 'Relationships and sexuality' focus area within the Health and Physical Education learning area. The Curriculum connection: Respectful relationships highlights opportunities for respectful relationships to

be embedded across a range of learning areas, such as English, Humanities and Social Sciences and Digital Technologies.¹⁷ The South Australian Curriculum for Public Education is an adapted version of the Australian Curriculum developed for Reception to Year 10 students in South Australia. The first four learning areas of the adapted curriculum have been released in 2024 and full adoption is expected in 2027.¹⁸

Elements of the national Early Years Learning Framework relate to relationships education. Key learning outcomes include supporting children to have a strong sense of identity and wellbeing, to 'interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect', be 'effective communicators' and to 'respond to diversity with respect'.¹⁹

South Australia's state-based Keeping Safe: Child Protection Curriculum is mandated in all government preschools and schools for children and young people from age 3 to year 12. This curriculum seeks to support children and young people 'to be able to understand, recognise and respond to all forms of abuse including gender-based violence' and has four focus areas: the right to be safe, relationships, recognising and reporting abuse, and protective strategies.²⁰ While the Keeping Safe: Child Protection Curriculum may complement or provide a foundation for more comprehensive respectful relationships education, there is a gap between the child protection focus of this curriculum-based approach and best-practice whole-of-school approaches to relationships and sexual health education.²¹

SHINE SA has developed an evidence-based comprehensive relationships and sexual health curriculum Teaching It Like It Is for Years 3 to Year 10 that is mapped to the Australian Curriculum and the Keeping Safe: Child Protection Curriculum. SHINE SA provides training and support for educators to deliver this curriculum through the Focus Schools Program. This program is recognised as a best practice model nationally based on its full compliance with UNESCO guidance, feedback gathered from students through annual surveys, and relatively high uptake among eligible schools.²²

Key challenges and barriers to be addressed

There are a number of systemic challenges and barriers that impede children and young people's rights to positive relationships, sexual health and wellbeing. This includes their access to relevant and inclusive education, information and services.

Key challenges and barriers to be addressed include:

1. School cultures do not consistently respect rights or promote gender equality.
2. Lack of consistent, comprehensive, positive school-based relationships and sexual health education
 - a. Lack of monitoring and oversight of curriculum delivery
 - b. Inconsistent duration, timing and content
 - c. Lack of engaging lessons
 - d. Lack of inclusivity
 - e. Too much focus on risk and harm.
3. No statewide strategy for children and young people's reproductive and sexual health.

1. School cultures do not consistently respect rights or promote gender equality

One of the most effective ways to promote children's understanding of respectful relationships and rights is to create environments where their rights are respected and where they experience respect in all interactions and relationships.

However, as highlighted in my [Stereotypes and Sexism report](#), the culture and practices of many schools reinforce sexist attitudes and language, as well as gender stereotypes. Sexism is considered such a normal part of school culture that students generally do not consider it worth reporting. Where it is reported, it is not adequately addressed. A failure to challenge sexism and stereotypes has significant impacts on the wellbeing and participation

of all children and young people, regardless of gender. It also limits the effectiveness of comprehensive relationships and sexual health education.

“ In co-ed schools when the boys did something bad, the girls were asked to sit between them or walk to the front office. (11, female) ”

“ From personal experience, boys who don't act as stereotypes are usually excluded more often. Such as if they are weaker, display their emotions more often – they are usually the ones bullied or made fun of. (14, male) ”

Whole-of-school approaches to relationships and sexual health education recognise the importance of going beyond curriculum to embed equal and respectful attitudes, values, behaviours and practices across school environments, in all relationships, policies and procedures.²³ While schools participating in SHINE SA's Focus Schools Program establish a 'whole of school commitment', the extent to which these commitments translate into whole-of-school practice appears to be limited.

We cannot expect children and young people to learn about their rights if their rights are not consistently upheld in their interactions with adults and systems, including in education settings. Children and young people highlight the prevalence and impacts of exclusion and discrimination in schools, including based on gender, sexuality, cultural background, disability, and/or experiences of poverty and homelessness. They also describe a lack of voice, choice and influence at school, and they want more opportunities to be heard in relation to how, what, where they learn.

“ Our opinions [are] not being heard and implemented into the school. (Year 10, male) ”

Experiences and practices in schools are not immune from mixed or negative messages about relationships, gender and sexuality across the community and in the media, including backlash and opposition to women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and the provision of relationships and sexual health education.

2. Lack of consistent, comprehensive, positive school-based relationships and sexual health education

It is clear from what children and young people, families, educators and service providers are telling us that access to comprehensive relationships and sexual health education is inconsistent across schools and school sectors. This inconsistency relates to the timing, quality, content and relevance of relationships and sexual health education across the state.

We also know that some groups of children and young people are vulnerable to missing out on school-based education, including due to moving schools or absence, exclusion or disengagement from school. This includes children and young people in contact with the youth justice system, children in out-of-home care and/or children and young people living with disability.

a. Lack of monitoring and oversight of curriculum delivery

A range of policies, curriculum frameworks and associated learning resources support the delivery of relationships and sexual health education (or elements of it) in South Australia. However, there is no oversight mechanism or framework to monitor or report on the implementation and delivery of relationships and sexual health programs. This makes it difficult to assess what, when and how curriculum is being delivered, even when curriculum is mandated. This also creates and compounds significant inconsistencies across and between schools and school sectors.

SHINE SA provides opportunities for students, teachers and parents/carers to provide feedback on the Focus Schools Program each year and this is reported on annually. However, there is no systemic monitoring of relationships and sexual health curriculum or programs across the state more broadly. There is also no way of monitoring the delivery of programs or access to information for children and young people who are outside of the mainstream schooling system.

Ideally, all schools would be implementing evidence-based programs which build capacity for educators to deliver comprehensive relationships and sexual health education. Such programs should be funded for all primary and secondary schools across all sectors. These programs must be comprehensive, evidence-based, and inclusive of diversity.

Currently, relationships and sexual health education programs may be delivered internally or by a variety of external providers with a range of backgrounds, perspectives and focus areas. This includes individuals and organisations representing police or sporting clubs, or organisations with a focus on child protection or mental health. There is currently limited oversight of the extent to which these providers are aware of the needs of a particular school community and able to ensure consistency, repetition and inclusivity. The Department for Education has recently developed a list of approved providers for sexual health education. From the end of October 2024, government primary and secondary schools will only be able to select providers from this list.²⁴

b. Inconsistent duration, timing, and content

Relationships and sexual health education is not available across all year levels, and there is significant variation in the duration of programs, who is teaching it, what is being taught, and how, when and where it is being taught. It is currently either being taught as a stand-alone program or in the context of existing subjects such as health and physical education, biology, or religious education.

Many young people describe their relationships and sexual health education as brief, sometimes limited to a 'one-off' program, or a handful of sessions each year in certain year levels. Relationships and sexual health education should begin in the early years – where key relationships and friendships are forming and in line with the Early Years Learning Framework – and continue consistently in a scaffolded way throughout the school years, building knowledge year on year.

Currently, this education often comes too late, with many young people reflecting on how earlier education could have helped them keep themselves or others safe. At the same time, it is commonly lacking in the senior years of school, despite this being a stage of life where young people are exploring their identity and forming new relationships.

- “ Currently, sex-ed in South Australia is taught highly inconsistently, with some students barely taught it at all. I know students who can only recall having one sex-ed lesson in their entire secondary schooling, and even those who have had regular sex-ed classes often reflect that they were still left inadequately prepared for relationships. (16, female)
- “ By the time we ‘learnt’ about [consent] most people had already experience sexual harassment or assault and schools played no role in helping them. (17, non-binary)

Many schools deliver programs focused on specific topics or aspects of relationships and sexual health education, including lessons on social and emotional learning, consent, respectful relationships, personal safety and/or protective behaviours. However, such topic-specific programs have limited impact when delivered ‘in isolation of all the other concepts, and/or outside a programmatic approach across the year levels’.²⁵

Relationships and sexual health education should include all forms of relationships and support foundational social and emotional literacy skills for all children to communicate their feelings, understand and set boundaries, and develop respectful relationships with others. Children and young people are calling out for more support navigating friendships and relationships with peers and family.

Content related to consent, gender equality, and respectful relationships was strengthened in version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum. While these are welcome developments, these need to be taught alongside other topics that make up the comprehensive best-practice approach set out in UNESCO guidance.

c. Lack of engaging lessons

Efforts to improve respectful relationships education tend to focus on strengthening curriculum and addressing gaps in content. The importance of who is teaching relationships and sexual health education, how it is taught, and the classroom and school context receive less attention.

Children and young people report that current approaches are more like lectures than open conversations and that they are rarely provided with opportunities to ask questions, explore ideas, or have open discussions about multiple viewpoints. They want teachers to talk ‘with’ rather than ‘at’ them. They make clear links between their teacher’s level of knowledge, confidence, and comfort, and their own levels of comfort, confidence, and ability to engage.

Relationships and sexual health education is more engaging, effective, relevant and inclusive when it is informed by children and young people’s views and experiences. This is consistent with UNESCO guidance, which outlines that comprehensive sexuality education should ‘employ participatory teaching methods that actively involve children and young people and help them internalise and integrate information’.²⁶

All children and young people want to have access to comprehensive and inclusive information in an environment where they feel safe. Children and young people highlight the importance of positive relationships with teachers and peers based on trust and respect and the importance of a classroom and school environment where they feel safe.

- “ I often feel like i am getting told off or i am in trouble when learning about sex in class. (16, female)
- “ Less ‘teaching’ and more asking what teens actually want to know. (17, female)
- “ It should be almost entirely discussion based and taught by someone who understands what they’re talking about and the age level they’re teaching. (15, male)

“ It needs to be open, factual and nonjudgmental. If the class is comfortable together, they will be able to become more involved and ask questions that they want answered. I think that people need to be able to discuss what they're feeling, thinking and doing without the fear of judgement or reprisal. They should be taught about safety and the law rather than just told to not do it. (17, male)

“ In high school, I specifically remember my teacher saying, “No one in here is gay so we can just skip all that stuff.” (18, male)

“ I know how to date and have great and safe sex with women... [but] I'm gay. (17, male)

“ As someone with a physical disability I felt under-represented and not prepared. (21, female)

d. Lack of inclusivity

There is also variability in terms of the extent to which relationships and sexual health education respects and includes the diversity and rights of all children and young people. Program content, delivery, and classroom environments may be overtly discriminatory, or they may overlook, erase, or lack relevance for certain groups of people and experiences.

Many young people, particularly LGBTQIA+ young people, young people with disability and/or culturally and linguistically diverse young people, do not see themselves represented in the examples or scenarios used in relationships and sexual health education.

Responses to my [Sex Education survey](#) reflect that male and heteronormative experiences and perspectives are generally considered the 'norm'. LGBTQ+ young people reported much poorer experiences of school-based education and were less likely than non-LGBTQ+ young people to view the education they received as relevant to them. Young women were less likely than young men to rate their relationships and sexual health education as positive and relevant.

Evidence suggests that improving access to comprehensive relationships and sexual health education that is respectful of diverse cultures, sexualities, and genders can help to challenge prejudice and stereotypes, and reduce discrimination in school environments.²⁷ At the same time, more action is needed beyond curriculum to ensure schools promote equality and respect.

e. Too much focus on risk and harm

Many children and young people describe how relationships and sexual health education tends to focus disproportionately on risks and harm prevention. At the same time, sexual assault and violence, including practical guidance on where and how to seek support before or if it occurs, are among the topics least likely to be covered in school-based relationships and sexual health education.

Young people want more information about what makes positive, fun and healthy relationships, rather than solely focusing on what can go wrong. They report that it is easier to find information about unhealthy relationships and 'red flags' than it is to find information about healthy relationships and 'green flags'. They describe how 'fear tactics' that seek to scare young people about the criminal consequences of certain sexual behaviours are unhelpful, particularly if used alone.

When covered at all, consent tends to be limited to the absence or presence of consent according to legal definitions of consent, rather than how consent might be discussed in real-life social situations and relationships.

A focus on risk and harm reinforces stigma, makes children and young people feel like they are being punished, and prevents help-seeking. This also goes against the evidence highlighting the importance of framing relationships and sexuality in positive terms from a young age and focusing on positive aspects of sexuality before covering sexual violence.²⁸

- “ They also didn’t talk about how respect your partner, only how to identify if you’re in a bad relationship. (16, male)
- “ All I was taught was... [sexual assault] was bad but we already knew that. So when it happened to me, I didn’t know what to do. (17, female)

3. No statewide strategy for children and young people’s reproductive and sexual health

Reproductive and sexual health is an important element of comprehensive relationships and sexual health education, but there is no statewide strategy that meets the specific reproductive and sexual health rights of children and young people.

More broadly, South Australia currently lacks an overarching vision for children and young people’s health, which means there is no way of aligning cross-government efforts to a common set of actions and goals. Across health policy, there tends to be a limited focus on the specific needs of children and young people, with the experiences of adults generally implied or considered as the ‘norm’.

Current responses tend to be reactive and focused on individuals once harm has occurred. We need a greater focus on prevention and community, including through collaboration across health, education and other sectors. This is explored further in my [Policy Position on Why we need an overarching vision for children and young people’s health in South Australia](#).

UNESCO guidance highlights that school-based education should link to youth-friendly services outside of schools. Through the Focus Schools Program, SHINE SA provides schools with updated information about what sexual health and wellbeing services are available and referral pathways, consistent with UNESCO guidance.

A broader strategy is needed to show commitment to, and have an overarching plan for, realising children and young people’s reproductive and sexual health rights. While school-based education may increase awareness of services, a strategy would help to ensure all services are child- and youth-friendly and promote universal access to services. As the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has highlighted, further action is needed to ‘ensure that health systems and services are able to meet the specific sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents’.²⁹

Recommendations

To realise children and young people's rights to positive relationships, sexual health and wellbeing, the South Australian government needs to:

1. **Develop a statewide strategy for children and young people's health that specifically addresses the reproductive and sexual health rights of children and young people, promotes universal access to information and services and addresses data gaps, social determinants of health and health inequities.**
2. **Commit to scaling up, standardising and resourcing the implementation of best-practice school-based programs to ensure comprehensive relationships and sexual health education:**
 - a. *Is consistently available in early childhood education and care settings and across all primary and secondary schools, year levels, and school sectors.*
 - b. *Starts in the early years and continues consistently through the senior years of school.*
 - c. *Is age-appropriate, developmentally appropriate and culturally appropriate and tailored to key transition points across childhood and adolescence.*
 - d. *Actively involves children and young people and provides safe environments to support their participation.*
 - e. *Promotes diversity, including diversity of gender, sexuality, culture and ability.*
 - f. *Promotes a positive approach to relationships and sexuality.*
 - g. *Focuses on understanding and supporting friendships.*
 - h. *Upskills pre-service and school teachers and educators as well as staff working outside of mainstream schools.*
 - i. *Promotes information about and access to services.*
 - j. *Engages and educates parents and families.*
 - k. *Provides additional and tailored support for particular groups who are vulnerable to missing out on school-based education.*
3. **Invest in whole-of-school approaches that transform the culture of schools to promote respect for rights, diversity and gender equality through:**
 - a. *Providing meaningful opportunities for children and young people to explore and discuss their rights at school and to be heard, including through participation in curriculum design.*
 - b. *Training for pre-service and school teachers and educators to prevent sexual harassment and promote gender equality in school environments.*
 - c. *Reviewing relationships and sexual health education materials to ensure they specifically address sexism and gender stereotypes.*
4. **Establish mechanisms to monitor, evaluate and report on the delivery and implementation of comprehensive relationships and sexual health education across all school sectors.**
5. **Beyond schools, consider the role of sports clubs, community groups, youth organisations, parenting programs, workplaces, the media and broader public health campaigns to improve access to information, education and services and realise children and young people's rights to positive relationships, sexual health and wellbeing.**

Endnotes

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